**Communal violence and the legacy of precolonial states**

The level of violence in non-state societies is qualitatively different from that of within states with rates of violence often being several orders magnitude higher in the former (Pinker 2011++). Part of this can be explained by that one of states’ primary objectives and defining characteristics is to solve the security dilemma (Lake and Rotchild 1996; Hobbes Leviathan). Several states in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa are judicially effective, but empirically less so (Jakcson and Rosberg 1982), in particular when it comes to solving the security dilemma. This has resulted in pockets where resolution of violent conflicts is frequently left to local traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, where there is no neutral arbiter to mediate or enforce peace should things get out of hand. While most of the time being able to resolve conflicts relatively peacefully, these institutions rely on the very real threat of deadly violence in itself in order to be credible (Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Eaton, 2008a,b). In areas where feuding has remained an accepted way of resolving disputes between communities, large-scale inter-ethnic violence is more likely to occur (Witsenburg and Zaal, 2012) as the state is unable to ‘contain fear’ in an effective and unbiased manner (Lake and Rotchild, 1996).

There might be variations in this semi-anarchic situation, however, as some areas have a long pre-colonial legacy of statehood which previously have addressed the security dilemma between ethnic groups. While it is an open question of how effective such institutions are in resolving disputes that have escalated into violence between communities, they have proven effective in reducing the number of less serious disputes that could escalate, thereby reducing the overall number of disputes that could escalate. In general therefore, where states existed prior to colonization, the risk of inter-communal violence should be lower.

Pre-colonial state-structures can reduce conflict potential in at least three partly separate ways. First, in some instances [identify examples] these institutions are present in themselves to a greater or lesser extent in modern states, but operate outside formal state structures. This could represent an efficient way of resolving low-level disputes that have escalatory potential. Case studies from SSA indicate that if a resource dispute arises…locals prefer to turn first to friends, neighbours and relatives, before resorting to traditional authorities like village elders or a chief (Turner et al., 2012, p. 749f)[[1]](#footnote-1). Formal institutions are at this stage often shunned. They are seen as less in touch with the local context, thus making inflexible judgements; being more costly and corrupt; and creating long-standing grievances between families. The presence of pre-colonial institutions today can therefore represent a more trusted venue for resolving disputes, in turn reducing the pool of incidences with escalatory potential.

Second, and partly in contrast to the above hypothesis, in some settings, pre-colonial institutions have been formally integrated into the state, the prime example being the integration of chiefs and kingdoms in contemporary Ghana. Studies using Afrobarometer data show that trust in traditional institutions translates into trust in modern institutions (Logan, 2009). This relation arguably also goes the other way, as informal institutions are more fragile if not recognized by the state (Ostrom, 1990). As there is some notion of British rule effectively being more indirect (thus not only in name) than former French and Lusophone colonies and therefore in the former pre-colonial states have been more effectively been incorporated in colonial and post-colonial states.

Third, pre-colonial states have left an imprint in terms of norms of intergroup behaviour that is different from areas without a legacy of pre-colonial statehood. By having reduced the security dilemma in past times, pre-colonial states have often facilitated the co-habitation of different ethnic groups in the same settlements, hence reducing the kind of segmentation often found in feuding societies (see e.g. Diamond 2012).[[2]](#footnote-2) By this states can indirectly facilitate the development of genuine inter-ethnic interaction and subsequent inter-ethnic norms and institutions for resolving disputes as ‘communities living together over time often establish institutions for dispute settlement and conflict- resolution (Hagberg, 1998). When a new group enters an area, such inter-ethnic institutions are not present and have to be built. Although this can be successful (Bogale and Korf, 2007; Adano et al.et al., 2012), it is far from certain. Newcomers might challenge local notions of property rights (Feyissa, 2011) or might have less secure claims to land (Turner et al.et al., 2012, p. :202). In a comparative study of eleven 11 cases of inter-group conflict in arid or semi-arid areas of SSA, Seter et al.et al. (2017) find that in-migration of new ethnic groups without previous relations can create problems over renewable resources as they have little previous experience with resource sharing arrangements and conflict management. Contrasting the peaceful, long-standing co-existence between pastoralist Fulbe and Mossi farmers in the Central Plateau of Burkina Faso with the recent in-migration of Fulbe into northern Côte d’Ivoire causing intense violence, Breusers et al.et al. (1998, p. :375) suggest that ‘“…the extent to which the ethnic groups involved have had a “‘common”’ history is probably of the utmost importance’” for how conflicts are resolved.’

Institutions can be defined as ‘stable, valued, recurring patterns of behavior’ (Huntington, 1965, p. 394). A central distinction can be drawn between formal (state-made) and informal (made by non-state actors) institutions.

Another selling point: Theories of interethnic cooperation and violence are very often not involving the state directly (Lake and Rotchild 1996; Fearon and Laitin 1996), and to test such mechanisms one should therefore test them on data on inter-group violence. Hitherto these theories have mostly been tested on data whereby insurgents challenge the state.

1. Ref to author in-depth interviews in Northern Tanzania fall 2016 and check survey data from ABS. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note parallel to the bonding vs bridging debate within political behaviour literature focusing on increasing polarization in the West. E.g. Putnam. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)